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ABSTRACT

New group-discussion language laboratories and the implementation of a subject-language interaction method are described. The use of the language equipment emphasizes free oral intercourse and allows the subject and language or other didactical questions to be dealt with in turns, rather than simultaneously. The laboratories allow students' 14 microphones, with or without the teachers' two microphones, to work together. The crucial aspect of the method is the process of teaching in sequences. A whole sequence of discussions, whose length depends on content, may elapse before the teacher concentrates on purely language questions. The system allows tracing back the passages or the particular words to be the object of didactical comment. During students' speaking or reading, the teacher, when noticing mistakes of pronunciation and intonation, can imprint an impulsion on the recording tape by pressing a button. When the student has finished, the teacher can press buttons "play" and "repeat" and the recorder will unwind the tape, stop at the last impulsion and start playing back the passage with a mistake or anything worth noting. The method can be used to discuss terminology encountered in a passage, the contents of the same passage, and sequences of actual discussing or debating the subjects. Each kind of sequence will be recorded while the teacher can imprint impulsions for consecutive teaching purposes. The equipment used prior to this newly designed equipment is also discussed. (SW)

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The Group-Discussion Language Laboratory Developed to Assist a Subject-Language Interaction Method

1) First stage of development and experiencing

In a previous paper published in *Bulletin CILA 15*, 1972[1], it was intended to demonstrate that when students have reached a certain level of fluency in a second language, they can considerably improve their ability to use it if they are systematically faced with the task of expressing meaningful criticism and comments on a subject – or parts of it – that is the object of a study.

We also endeavoured to show that such a method, which we called in French "méthode de communication"[2], implies the problem of how and when to intervene with the teaching of language technicalities.

Our conclusion was that voice-amplifying and electronic recording material could be of great help in facilitating both the discussing and consecutive teaching procedures that the method consisted in.

In the article quoted, we gave a description of the sound equipment that had been designed to fulfil the requirements consisting in allowing the voices of any participants – up to fourteen – sitting around a table to be amplified over loudspeakers and recorded at the same time. Whole recordings or passages identifiable by rev. counter digits could be played back.

The main idea in developing our particular language laboratory was, of course, to assist our teaching method with a view to enabling students to acquire a proficient command of the language in expressing and communicating ideas and facts.

Experience has shown that a number of major improvements could be brought to our equipment towards allowing the notion of free personal expression of problems under study to become even more central in the teaching process. Before we describe the new electronic teaching aid, let us take a critical look at the previous one. The shortcomings that practice revealed were the following:

a) a limited number of microphones, one for three participants, were at their disposal, which necessitated constant manipulating of them,

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1 "The Conference Language Laboratory or the Collective Audio-active Method of Proficiency Oral Practice", 21–26.

2 "La méthode de communication pour l'enseignement de l'anglais économique en tant que cours d'expression orale", *Bulletin CILA 18*, 1973, 58–68.

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b) before and after the speaker's performance, his microphone had to be switched on and off,
c) the speaker had to hold the unidirectional microphone very close to his mouth for proper amplifying and recording,
d) the use of rev. counter digits to trace a particular passage recorded for playback was uneasy.

In brief, we can say that a comparatively high degree of attention was demanded of the participants and of the teacher to obtain that the equipment operated to satisfaction. The somewhat burdening utilisation requirements resulted from the way the problem had been solved of preventing unpleasant hissing noises – Larsen effect – liable to occur through simultaneous use of microphones and loudspeakers located at short distances from one another.

2) Newly designed equipment

The removal of the Ecole des hautes études commerciales of the University of Lausanne to its new premises in the "Bâtiment des sciences humaines" at Dorigny near Lausanne (Switzerland), was the occasion for designing new equipment for what was intended to be a specific group-discussion language laboratory.

English for economic purposes, as a subject taught according to the method of "communication" assisted by our previous language laboratory, had gradually and quite naturally evolved into what we can refer to as a distinctively dual discipline amenable to a subject-language interaction method.

Indeed, both the subjects studied – Types of Business Unit, for instance – and the language itself hold a qualitatively equal part in that teaching method. Therefore, it was necessary that painstaking care was given to devising electronic material that allowed greatest ease of operation to enable both aspects of teaching to be dealt with in a very harmonious and efficient way. It was considered as fundamental that all participants – up to fourteen not including the teacher – should be able to speak at any time into their own microphones from a distance up to 70 cms and at angles on both sides reaching 45°.

To remove the drawbacks mentioned and fulfil the new requirements, increased technical difficulties had to be overcome, which meant, of course, more costly equipment. Under our guidance, the firm Gysin AG of Basle has engineered a number of devices with which ample experience has proved highly satisfactory.

The requirement that students' fourteen microphones – with or without the teacher's two microphones – should work together, has been satisfied. There is practically no manipulating of controls necessary any more during subject discussing, except to operate the recording control when required. Consequently the drawbacks mentioned under a), b) and c) have been eliminated, i.e. there is no need for the students to reach for microphones, to worry about keeping them well directed and near enough to their mouths during the performance and no need for the teacher to switch them on and off.

The crucial aspect of our method is the process of teaching in sequences. A whole sequence of individual or collective subject discussing, whose length depends on contents, may elapse before the teacher concentrates on purely language questions. He will be greatly helped by adequate playback of the passages concerned. The noting of rev. counter digits was the only method in our previous laboratory. In the new ones, rev. counters are still available. However, their use has become practically an exception as a new ingenious system has been devised for tracing back the passages or the particular words to be the object of didactical comment.

3) Latest step in integrating electronic teaching aids into the subject-language interaction method

To understand what the device mentioned consits in, it will be best to describe how it operates in the course of a teaching sequence.

Let us assume that a student is reading a passage to gather and communicate information in connection with the subject under study. Instead of interrupting several times for correcting purposes and greatly hindering consistent text comprehension, the teacher, when noticing mistakes of pronunciation and intonation – or anything else worth commenting on – can imprint an impulsion on the recording tape. He does it by pressing a button fixed on a small box he can hold in either hand. A cable attached to the box connects it with the recorder in the teacher's desk.

Should the teacher need to sit in one of the students' chairs – during an exposé given by one or two students from the teacher's desk where the retroprojector can be used –, the teacher can nevertheless keep the box in his hand. The length of the cable can be extended by pulling on it as there is a winding drum in the desk which allows shortening the cable in the same way.

But let us revert to the example given. When the student has finished reading his text, the teacher will press buttons "play" and "repeat" and what happens is broadly speaking as follows: the recorder will unwind the tape, stop at the last impulsion and start playing back the passage with a mistake or anything else worth noting. In reality, things are slightly more complicated. A fully automatic delaying device allows the taking into consideration of both the facts that the impulsion will be imprinted on the tape with some delay – teacher's reaction time – and that it is necessary to obtain a playback starting a few words before the mistake itself or anything else noted by the teacher. Indeed, attention must be drawn to it by a few words preceding the precise point that the teacher wants to comment on.

To proceed with comments, he will stop the playback after the point has been conveyed clearly. A general discussion might arise. When the matter is dealt with, the teacher will have the recorder play the next point memorized through an impulsion. The fact that these points can only be dealt with contrary to chronological order is no drawback as their discussing very seldom necessitates calling to mind chronological sequence of ideas and facts and mainly concerns language questions.

Let us clearly point out that besides reading sequences for the sake of gathering information, as the one just mentioned, the method applied in our group-discussion laboratories implies sequences devoted to discussing the terminology encountered in a passage read or set forth orally or played on the recorder, etc., sequences of reporting and commenting on the contents of the same passage – ideas and facts –, and sequences of actual discussing or debating the subjects supplied as well as the students' personal contributions. Each kind of sequence will be recorded while the teacher can imprint impulsions for consecutive teaching purposes.

The teacher can, of course, intervene immediately to correct some blatant language mistake whenever he considers that it can be done without interfering with the emphasis that the method lays on the subjects dealt with during the time of the sequence intended for information or discussion.

4) Conclusion

Our new group-discussion language laboratories are a well suited tool to assist the techniques used for implementing our subject-language interaction method. The dynamic character of our teaching is greatly enhanced by the use of equipment emphasizing free oral intercourse. The fact that subject and language or other didactical questions can be dealt

with in turns, rather than simultaneously, enables concentrating on both aspects.

As motivation, especially in the field of language learning at university level, depends greatly on the interest that arises from the subjects selected, the teaching of language competence, as a means to grasp and express ideas and facts in the domain of the students' studies, is going a long way towards efficacious and lasting learning. The method used and the electronic aid to assist it will be a decisive factor.

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